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Anxious buyers await IBM's new line of PCs

As of this moment, many business buyers of personal computers are in a holding pattern, anxiously awaiting IBM's announcement of a new line of PCs. The rumors have been flying for months that the release of the new machines is imminent, and everyone is getting impatient.

It might happen today, next week or next month. But whenever it does, most experts predict it will shake up the small computer industry in much the same way that the original IBM PC did in 1981.

This poses a dilemma for people in the market for a personal computer today, because it's tempting to buy one of the low-priced PC clones. Even though the clone prices seem to get lower every day, one commonly heard argument is better to hold off any buying decisions for now.

Here's why.

First of all, as soon as IBM's new PCs are announced, assuming that the rumors are right and some of the new machines are incompatible with the older machines, the prices and market value of existing PCs and PC clones will fall dramatically. Second, the features of the new machines should be considered before you buy. You might not want or need the new features, but then again, you won't know for sure until you've had a chance to evaluate them.

In the meantime, I'll pass along the latest completely unsubstantiated descriptions of IBM's new PC product line, just to whet your appetite.

✓ Low-priced model. Intended mainly for home and educational use, this model will be the most compatible with existing PCs. It will use the 8086 chip, the same microprocessor chip used in today's PCs, and will run DOS 3.3, an operating system very similar to the current version 3.2. It will be about two-thirds the size of the older IBM PC, and will use 3.5-inch floppy diskettes instead of 5.25-inch diskettes. The most exciting improvement will be a color screen with exceptionally good resolution.

✓ Medium-priced model.

Aimed squarely at the business market, this model deviates from the current standard and will replace existing model XTs and ATs. It will use the 80286 chip, but will contain proprietary circuitry that will be difficult or impossible for the clone manufacturers to duplicate. Using Microsoft's Advanced DOS, it will allow more than one program to run simultaneously, and will be designed to be hooked up to local area networks so that many PCs can share files, large hard disks and laser printers. It also will have a higher resolution color monitor and use 3.5-inch floppy diskettes.

✓ High-priced model. IBM's new flagship PC will use the new Intel 80386 chip, and will be intended as a file server for networks of PCs and as a single-user work station for "power users." It will be sought by programmers and corporate users who require enhanced speed. It also will contain proprietary circuitry, have a higher resolution color monitor and use 3.5-inch floppy diskettes.

Let's assume that we knew for sure that the new machines will be announced on April 1, and that because of the initial rush they would not be actually available for purchase until sometime during the summer. What would be your best course of action right now, if you need a new computer today?

It depends on two factors: complexity of your application and speed required. If your computer needs are straightforward and do not require top-of-the-line speed — for example, to use WordPerfect for word processing, Lotus 1-2-3 for spreadsheet work — you'd probably be safe buying a low-cost XT clone. The Tandy 3000 HL is a good example. It would certainly satisfy your needs for several years.

On the other hand, if you're looking for a general-purpose machine that could run all the latest multitasking software as it's released, I'd recommend putting off a buying decision for several months. In the meantime, rent a machine if you have to, just to tide you over.



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